

Becoming a Gun Safe Congregation
Rabbi Michael S. Friedman
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I was fortunate to grow up in a congregation whose senior rabbi, Rabbi Jerry Davidson, was a master preacher. He spoke with great intelligence and sophistication and rigor and passion. And his sermons almost always focused on social justice. A woman's right to choose, separation of church and state, civil rights. And with many of these sermons all of us out in the congregation would nod our heads in agreement. We would say very nice words of approval to our neighbors. And then we would go home and have our Rosh Hashanah lunch, or our Yom Kippur break-fast, and sometimes we would talk about the sermon but more often we would go about our lives and nothing would change.

I was very proud to have a rabbi who inspired to consider the most important issues of the day. But I also *wondered* about the gap between hearing a sermon that motivates us and acting on it once we leave.

Our Torah bridges the gap between words and action with a single word. At the very beginning of the Torah portion we read this morning God calls out to Abraham by name. And Abraham's response is *Hineini* – literally “Here I am.” *Hineini* is one of the most important words in the entire Torah. It is used when someone is called upon to turn from their usual routine and take an action that will change their life. When Jacob calls upon Joseph to look after his brothers, Joseph responds *Hineini*. When God first calls out to Moses from the burning bush telling him to go free his people, Moses responds *Hineini*. This single word, *Hineini*, actually implies three powerful steps. “I hear you. I'm listening with intention. I'm ready to act.”

Why do individuals come together to join a synagogue? For Jewish ritual, learning and community, to be sure. But it's more than that. Each of us joined this congregation to be part of something larger than ourselves. We want to have an impact on the world in a way that we could never have on our own. And that is especially true for me. As your rabbi, my greatest hope is that the words we say, the prayers we sing, the principles we teach will spur us to make our values manifest outside our walls. We desperately want to live in a world that reflects and lives by the values that we hold sacred. So let's bridge that gap from hearing to action.

Let me give you an example of what it looks like when we act with common purpose. All of us are aware of the worldwide refugee crisis. Millions have fled war zones in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere. The civil war in Syria alone has displaced hundreds of thousands.

We Jews, especially, should have particular empathy for refugees. So many of our families hold memories of what it was like to be forced from our homes, to travel to a new land desperately seeking a safe place. That's why I'm proud that we did not only preach sympathy with refugees, we acted, as a congregation, upon our this most important of principles. Temple Israel has joined with six other local congregations in an interfaith coalition to resettle a refugee family here in our community.

Mohammed and Nour and their two small children were forced to leave their hometown in Syria in 2011 when it was bombed by the Assad regime. That attack left 1500 people dead, including many of their family and friends. The family fled to Alexandria, Egypt, where they lived in more than a dozen different apartments within just a few years. They applied to come here, were thoroughly vetted by the State Department, and arrived in July. A team of over 100 volunteers has procured a home for them to live in, provided daily English lessons, and looked after each step of their transition. Their daughter and son, now ages 8 and 5, have started school. Mohammed, who has experience both in the import/export business and as a chef, is looking for suitable employment. They have started a new life. We are committed to helping them feel safe and secure here, and to achieve levels of educational and personal achievement that so many of us enjoy.

Perhaps you have read news stories or heard reports about refugee resettlement efforts elsewhere. It seems to me that there is a common denominator in every single one. It is primarily churches and synagogues that create and sustain such initiatives. Simply put, without religious people willing to make their values manifest in the world, this would not happen.

I am very proud that TI has helped resettle a refugee family. If you would like to know how you can volunteer to be part of this effort we have created a page on our website so that you can learn about the family's needs and how you can help. Today I want to talk with you about another important way that we can make our congregation's values manifest in the world.

The truth is evident to us all: senseless gun violence has claimed far too many lives. The Jewish year 5776 was a particularly terrible year for gun violence. We witnessed mass shootings on a near-monthly basis across our nation and around the world. There were countless other preventable gun deaths, in homes and public spaces. Sometimes children accidentally shot other children.

As your rabbi, I can no longer in good conscience stand in front of our congregation and lament these tragedies. I have done that too many times. Words were long ago deemed empty and pointless. They are, as Macbeth says, "Full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." How many times have we posted heartfelt sympathies on Facebook after a tragic event far away? That is nice and it's sympathetic but chances are all of your friends already agree with you. And so we know that "slacktivism," as it's called, is far from sufficient. Worst of all it is disingenuous.

[Yom Kippur is not a day to lament! Isaiah berates us: "Is this the kind of fast day I want? A day to appear sad, to put on a long face, to wear black?"]

If we really lament these shootings, if we are truly feel as bad as we say we do, and if we truly want them to stop then let's do something about it. Sadly, none of us can stop a murderous rampage in Orlando or Charleston or Newtown. But we can make sure that we build a culture of gun safety and responsibility here in Westport and Weston. Let's put the strength of this congregation behind a principle that matters to us all: creating a safe community.

We are launching an initiative to make Temple Israel a **Gun Safe Congregation**. In fact, Temple Israel is going to be the very first congregation – Jewish, Christian or Muslim – to brand itself in this manner.

I could recite all sorts of statistics for you. 31 Americans are killed each day by guns, 7 of whom are children or teenagers. A gun kept at home is far more likely to harm someone in that home than it is to be used in self-defense.

You might be saying to yourself right about now, "I don't own a gun." Ok. But we are all responsible for creating a culture of safety, and a standard of behavior here in our congregation, in our homes, and throughout our community. At the same time, let me state clearly: I respect the Second Amendment. I respect those who choose to exercise their constitutional right to "keep and bear arms." At the same time I want to make sure we are doing so safely and responsibly.

What does it mean to be a Gun Safe Congregation? There are several aspects, beginning at our congregational home and radiating outward. It means that we are committed to creating a culture of safety in our community. Certainly all of us have a role to play in that effort.

1. First – and I think this goes without saying but I'm going to say it anyway – *no one should feel the need to bring a firearm into Temple Israel*. We have a trained security team here. We have an excellent relationship with the Westport Police Department. We review our security stance on a regular basis. Our congregation is safe.
2. Second, *If you own a gun at home it should be stored safely away, under lock and key*. As Chief Koskinas of the Westport Police Department said, "There's absolutely no reason your gun shouldn't be secured." In addition, *you should be properly trained* in firearm use and safety. The Talmud teaches that you can't own a dangerous animal at home and then feign surprise when your pet tiger suddenly attacks. Gun ownership is similar. If you're going to own one, understand that it is a dangerous weapon, and get yourself trained. In fact, all members of your household should be trained too. I myself got trained in firearm safety with the help of the Westport PD just a couple of weeks ago. I wanted to be sure that if I ever had reason to handle a firearm I would know how to do so safely and responsibly. If your rabbi can get trained in gun safety, so can you.

3. Next, let's keep our precious children safe. *When we send our child to a neighbor's home we need to ask whether there's a gun in the house, and whether it's safely secured.* I know we don't live in a community where guns are a visible part of the culture, but I would bet that there are more guns around than we realize. So we have to start asking other parents about guns in their homes even if it may feel nosy. And we have to keep asking until the question is a natural part of the culture of our community. One member of our congregation told me that she broaches this difficult issue by saying to another parent, "I want you to know, we don't have any guns in our home." That opens the conversation in a non-judgmental manner. And by the way, if it turns out that there is a gun in the other home, she gladly invites the child to play at her home.
4. Continuing to expand the circle outward, *we will put the strength of this congregation behind sensible legislation and public policy initiatives* to make our community safer. We are fortunate that Connecticut has some of the toughest gun laws in the nation. We will work with allies such as Connecticut Against Gun Violence and the Connecticut Police Chiefs Association to continue to pass sensible laws that keep us safe. And even in an era of stretched budgets, we will support increased funding across all mental health services. We will find opportunities to support sensible gun safety legislation in Washington too, despite the numerous obstacles such legislation often faces.
5. Finally, we will continue to *work with our interfaith partners to encourage manufacturers to bring smart gun technology to the marketplace.* Our interfaith community organizing group has made it gun safety a priority. However in so many places around our country legislation on guns is either blocked or ineffective. That's why we are aiming to mobilize the power of the free market to change the culture around firearms in our nation. It is astounding to learn that 40% of all guns are purchased using taxpayer dollars. Yes, local police departments, state troopers and corrections, federal marshals, FBI, and of course the military together buy 40% of the guns sold in America. Our interfaith community organizing group, Congregations Organized for a New Connecticut, is trying to use the collective buying power of the public sector to encourage manufacturers to bring smart guns to the marketplace. A smart gun is like your smart phone – it uses technology to ensure that only the legal owner can operate it. Bringing smart guns to market will reduce accidental shootings, theft of weapons, and the number of guns sold illegally. Smart guns would have prevented several recent mass shootings, including the one in Newtown. Over 100 municipalities – including Fairfield, Bridgeport and Stamford – and several states, including Connecticut, have already signed on to our strategy. So has the White House. We will continue to work to bring smart guns to market in the interest of public safety; in the interest of life.

We are going to place these action steps front and center. The Talmud says, "If you save even one life you have saved the entire world." In now becoming a Gun Safe Congregation we aim to establish a standard that changes the culture of our community, sanctifies human life, and increases peace in the world.

These particular issues, gun safety and addressing the refugee crisis, are important to me personally. I have asked our congregation to take action on them because I have learned through conversations that they are important to many of you too. And I know there are other priorities on your mind as well. We want to hear what they are.

Thus I invite you to take part in a series of intimate conversations that we will host in congregants' homes this fall. I invite you to come and share a story about a pressure you or your family is facing, or a concern you have for our community. We will listen to one another carefully. Based on what we hear, we will choose new priorities that we will act on together. Look for communications about these conversations in the coming days. Make this a part of your new year.

We recently placed a rainbow flag on Temple Israel's front door. Now, the rainbow flag doesn't change for a second who we are. Our congregation has long been committed to LGBTQ rights. Rabbi Orkand began officiating at same-sex weddings more than a decade ago, well before they were sanctioned by the state. But the flag is important today because it publicly states our values and helps us make them manifest both inside and outside our walls.

Dear God, as this new year begins, let us make this a sermon – an expression of our values – that everyone will hear. Let us be part of something larger than ourselves. Let us be a congregation that acts together. Let us be a congregation that changes the culture of our community. Let us be a congregation that changes our world together. Let us do all this and more, in this new year, for the sake of life.

Ken yehi ratzon – may it be so.